

OBITUARY

JUNE MAVIS SCRYMGOUR

1920—2000

June Scrymgour was employed by the South Australian Museum for almost 20 years. She achieved Curatorship of Minerals before retiring in 1982, and continued in an Honorary capacity for many more years. She died on 23 September 2000, after a long period of worsening illness.

June was born in Adelaide on 9 June 1920, the first of three children. Rheumatic fever as a child left her susceptible to strokes late in life. She did not complete high school, but left to work as a short-hand typist in the family hardware business. During World War II June joined the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), and for a time became a radio announcer. After the war, she had several secretarial jobs, but with increasing dissatisfaction because of a frustrated interest in natural history.

In 1963 June applied for and obtained a position in the South Australian Museum, as assistant to the newly-arrived Curator of Geology, Dr David Corbett. Despite her lack of formal training in earth sciences, or even natural history, June threw herself wholeheartedly into the task, making notes of any comments by visiting researchers that were pertinent to specimens they were examining. In this way she built up a basic knowledge of the subject, insofar as it was represented in the collections. Subsequently, June found a love of conveying this information to the general public. A number of sets of minerals or fossils typical of different groups or ages were compiled and mounted in book-file boxes for transport to and display at talks she would give to various organisations and groups. At about this time she undertook night school classes and completed her high school matriculation. This enabled her to apply to do the Geology I course at Adelaide University, which she undertook with enthusiasm.

As Corbett had become involved as a lecturer in the Adelaide University's Department of Adult Education, so did June begin to help in the preparation of exhibits for the talks. From 1966 she started to participate, as children's tutor, in the annual Spring Schools organised by that department, the first being to Chowilla on the River Murray. Subsequent venues included Angorichina in the Flinders Ranges (1967),

Muloorina near Lake Eyre (1971) and Nonning in the Gawler Ranges (1973). There were also weekend schools for children and Junior Field Naturalists trips in the Adelaide area.

In 1968, following the resignation of David Corbett, the Geology Department of the Museum was split into the Mineralogy and Palaeontology Sections, and a mineralogist, Geoff Milne, was appointed. June continued as assistant to both sections and, although the collections were already basically separated, she set about making the final separation—that of the sectional libraries—and preparing for the arrival of the new curators of each section. Milne arrived in November 1968 and relations with his assistant deteriorated, partly due to different attitudes to the mineral collections and June's natural protective feeling towards the specimens. The arrival of the new Curator of Fossils, Neville Pledge, in mid-1969 alleviated the situation slightly, as June now had a different focus of attention. When, in mid-1970, Milne suddenly resigned and Pledge was away on extended fieldwork, June was again in charge of both sections. On Pledge's return June was given responsibility, in the interim, of the Mineral Section, and subsequently it was decided not to seek a new Curator. With this new responsibility, June undertook an active acquisition program to increase the size, diversity and quality of the mineral collection, mainly by exchange, but she also undertook modest collecting trips around the State in later years. She took a special interest in meteorites and australites, the Museum collections of which had been catalogued by Corbett. Much of her time in later years would be spent with these objects.

In 1967, during the last months of Corbett's curatorship, when June was starting the physical separation of the collections, she began to research the origins of the Museum's collection of Lake Callabonna *Diprotodon* fossils which, with other things, occupied a number of large cupboards in the passage outside the Palaeontology room. As a result, she made contact with a number of descendants of Ragless, Stirling, and Zietz, who had been involved in the 1892–93 discovery and excavation of the bones. She was able to obtain copies of photographs and letters,

and started compiling them with newspaper and other archival reports pertinent to the story she hoped to write. Unfortunately, she was not able to do this. However, the information was not lost but used in an exhibition, and an article published by this writer (Pledge 1994), to celebrate the centenary of the Lake Callabonna expedition.

During this same period June started another project which had a more tangible outcome for her. Partly as a result of leading a South Australian Field Naturalists excursion to see the geology at Hallett Cove, she commenced active field research of the area for the preparation of a field guide. Working with two Museum Honoraries, botanist Margaret Kenny and archaeologist Harold Cooper, she edited and published 'Hallett Cove, a field guide' in 1970, at a time when interest in preserving more of that area was growing. A revised edition was published two years later as a result of the publicity gained for the Reserve in the midst of an encroaching suburban sprawl, and a third printing in 1976. Among other outcomes of the first edition were the discovery of the first fossils (other than the Pliocene shells of the Hallett Cove Sandstone) to be found at Hallett Cove—a much-abraded tooth of the Pleistocene *Diprotodon* found by two schoolboys in beach gravel, and arthropod trails preserved in the Permian glacial varves, found by schoolgirl Helen Bailey during one of the field days at the height of the conservation campaign. Helen had previously been tutored by June on one of the Spring Schools.

Other projects at this time were the production of an illustrated 'The geological timescale (and) evolution—from the rock record' (1973a), for students and the lay public, and co-authoring with David Corbett a chapter on geology in *Yorke Peninsula, a Natural History* (1973b). June was now realising a growing interest in and concern for geological type localities, those sites from which geologists had described new geological features or formations and rock units. This subject would increasingly occupy her time.

With the resignation of Dr Helene Laws, the Curator of Marine Invertebrata, in 1973, June became the mother figure for female staff, a role that sometimes put her in disagreement with management or other curators. However, out of this came some benefit in the form of a new assistant, Faye Gommers, to be shared between Minerals and Fossils, which enabled June to revise the catalogue of meteorites and start other projects. June was now attracting a small but

dedicated coterie of volunteers (Mesdames Bertie Koch, Natalie Worthley and Eugenie Pugh, and Mr Gerhard Hörr) and Honorary Research Workers (Messrs Jim Johnson, Barrie Risely and William Cleverly). With the help of many of them, June started compiling a register of geological type sections in South Australia, this information to be used in assessing the environmental impact of proposed mining and exploration activities.

The Geological Data Retrieval System, as it was called, came to occupy more and more of June's time and the Sectional resources as she obtained detailed maps and aerial photographs, and made field trips to various parts of the State to verify and document important geological localities. However, with Jim Johnson, she was also able to produce a popular illustrated booklet on the minerals of South Australia (1975, revised 1978), and with Cleverly (1978) the first of several papers on australites. With Johnson and others she co-authored a description of the Brachina Meteorite (1977), and this led her to start lobbying for legislation to protect meteorites found in South Australia from exploitation by (mostly foreign) commercial collectors. This legislation was passed in 1980, as an amendment to the *South Australian Museum Act, 1976–1978, Part IIA—Meteorites*.

The next few years were busy, with the consolidation of the Geological Data Retrieval System, fieldwork to check sites and search for australites and meteorites, and, from 1979, the requirements and designing of new quarters for the Section in the planned new science wing just approved by the Government. In this last, June was able to increase and improve substantially the collection storage space, laboratories and offices over what they had been in the basement of the old Museum east (Stirling) wing.

Because of her lack of formal academic qualifications, June's achievements were not officially recognised for some years but, after continued lobbying and support from other staff, she was made an acting Curator in 1976 and Curator Grade I in the following year. June was promoted to Curator II in 1981 and retired on 29 June 1982, with planning still in progress for the new science building. On retirement, she was put in charge of the Geoscience Data Centre, and supervised its installation as a separate entity in the new Natural Science Building in 1985. With the appointment of a new Curator of Minerals in 1984, June was appointed an honorary research associate in Mineralogy.

Retirement did not change June's activities

much. Although arthritis prevented her from coming into the Museum regularly, she continued to maintain and upgrade the geological data system with the help of Barrie Risely. Together, they compiled all this information and eventually published it as a book (1991). But this was not the end, although a series of mild strokes were beginning to take their toll. June had, for many years, envisaged a revision of her Geological Time Scale and Evolution chart, and to this end she had accumulated much data from colleagues and other experts. However, the field of palaeontology is, in many ways, changing very rapidly, with new discoveries that change our understanding of evolution almost a weekly event. The task proved, therefore, to be more than she could handle, even by proxy with Risely and Hörr finding and bringing references to her at home, where she had by then become housebound.

June moved in with her younger sister Molly at Brighton in 1995. When Molly died she moved

into a retirement home at Aberfoyle Park, and later a nursing home, just days before her death on 23 September 2000. Her last project was unfinished. June never married. She is survived by her brother Peter, and two nieces and a nephew and their families.

June was, within her limitations which she recognised, an outstanding custodian of the collections under her care, meticulous almost to the point of obsession. She engaged well with the public, particularly children, to the advantage of the South Australian Museum for almost 20 years, and was the author or co-author of a number of publications of lasting value.

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